

Advancing Connectivity during the Coronavirus to Ensure Support for Seniors (ACCESS) Act

Representatives Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) and Peter King (R-NY)

Endorsing Organizations: AARP, the Center for Medicare Advocacy, Justice in Aging, the Long Term Care Community Coalition, and the National Consumer Voice for Quality Long-Term Care

Older adults are among the most vulnerable populations during the ongoing coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. According to the [World Health Organization](#), people over 60 are at the highest risk for severe disease and death from COVID-19, [with 80% of COVID-19 deaths in the U.S.](#) and [95% of deaths in Europe](#) occurring among older adults. In an effort to protect older adults from COVID-19, visits to nursing homes have been restricted across the country, and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) even announced a policy temporarily eliminating visitation in over one hundred VA nursing facilities.

While offering protection from the outbreak, these policies make older adults more susceptible to social isolation and loneliness by cutting them off from their primary advocates and caregivers while living in long-term care facilities: their families and loved ones. Further, social isolation introduces its own [set of health risks](#), including disrupting sleep patterns, slowing the healing of wounds, and increasing the risk of cardiovascular disease. In fact, not only can social isolation be as damaging to health as [smoking 15 cigarettes per day](#), it costs Medicare an [additional \\$6.7 billion](#) in spending per year.

Despite [recent guidance](#) from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to nursing homes to offer alternative means of communication to facilitate telehealth and remote visitation, such as virtual visits, many nursing homes lack the technology and infrastructure to implement these recommendations.

The *ACCESS Act* would help protect one of our most vulnerable populations from risking exposure to the virus by making important investments in existing telehealth programs and creating a grant program to facilitate the connection of older adults with their loved ones through virtual visits. Specifically, the *ACCESS Act* would:

- Authorize an emergency supplemental appropriation of \$50 million for the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Telehealth Resource Center Program to assist skilled nursing facilities under Medicare and nursing facilities under Medicaid in expanding their use of telehealth services;
- Require the Secretary of HHS to share recommendations on ways to improve access to telehealth services in nursing facilities and temporarily designated nursing facilities during the pandemic; and
- Establish a grant program authorizing HHS to issue specific guidance and award nursing facilities grants that enable residents to participate in "virtual visits" with loved ones while the health risk of in-person visits remains high during the pandemic.